

Spring 2008 Lambing Lecture

Why Lourdes Matters to Western Pennsylvania Catholics

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Kerry Crawford, board member of the Catholic Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania and author of Lourdes Today: A Pilgrimage to Mary's Grotto (Servant Books), presented the Lambing Lecture on April 20, 2008. Named in honor of Monsignor Andrew A. Lambing who laid the groundwork for what became the Western Pennsylvania Catholic Historical Society, the annual lecture was held this year at Holy Spirit Byzantine Catholic Church in Oakland. In the following article, Kerry presents highlights of her talk.

As the Church celebrates the 150th anniversary of Our Lady appearing to a fourteen-year old French girl, Bernadette Soubirous, there is no better time than today to shorten the distance between Lourdes and our corner of the world.

Between February 11 and July 16, 1858, a "beautiful lady," visible only to the slight and undernourished Bernadette, appeared eighteen times in a grotto in the foothills of the Pyrenees. She called for penance. She asked that a church be built and for people to come there in procession. And, ultimately, she revealed herself saying, "I am the Immaculate Conception." Our Lady directed Bernadette to wash and drink in the water. In following her instructions, Bernadette uncovered a hidden spring in the grotto. That spring, according to John Paul II who made five Lourdes pilgrimages, remains today a living source where faith is renewed, where body and soul are healed, and where the sense of the Church is strengthened.

Four years after the apparitions ended and a church inquiry had concluded, Bishop Bertrand Laurence, the bishop of Tarbes, declared the visitations of Mary Immaculate, the Mother of God, as true. He further described the many physical and spiritual healings already realized at Lourdes as wonders of grace which could only have God as their author. This proclamation increased greatly the numbers of European pilgrims who journeyed to the small mountain town. By the early 1880s, Americans had made their way to the grotto.

Father James R. Cox, known to many as Pittsburgh's pastor to the poor, celebrated a Mass of Thanksgiving at the grotto when he was stationed in France as a member of the American Expeditionary Forces (1917-1918). He credited his being a priest to a healing received through the intercession of Our Lady of Lourdes. "My interest in Lourdes is personal," the priest would later explain. "As a boy it was decided by the doctors that due to bad eyes my vocation to the priesthood was impossible of fulfillment." While his doctors at Mercy Hospital gave up hope, young Cox did not. Two hours after Lourdes water was placed on his eyes, the bandages were removed. "My eyes were cured," Father Cox reported. With his vision strengthened, Father Cox vowed to spread devotion to Our Lady of Lourdes. It was a promise he would keep until his death.

Named pastor of Old Saint Patrick's in 1923, Father Cox not only preached the Beatitudes, he modeled them for his parishioners. As the Depression tightened its grip on the nation in the 1930s, Father Cox presided as "honorary mayor" of Shantytown, an encampment he established for unemployed men next to the church. The parish, at his direction, served meals to the hungry and provided clothing, coal, and medical care. In 1932, the activist priest led 25,000 unemployed men on the March of the Jobless to Washington, D.C. and later threw his hat into the ring for president. Running on the Jobless Party ticket, he campaigned around the country until stepping down to support Franklin D. Roosevelt.

As devoted as Father Cox was to Old Saint Patrick's and to the working man, he was equally – if not more – devoted to Our Lady of Lourdes. In his tenure at the parish, he established Lourdes devotions, founded the Lourdes Society open to Catholics and non-Catholics alike, distributed Lourdes water, and began and ended every activity with a prayer to his adopted patroness.

Father Cox shepherded twenty pilgrimages to Lourdes. For this extraordinary effort, the Sanctuaries of Lourdes named him a chaplain of honor. In 1947, Father Cox promoted on WJAS radio what, according to him, was the first pilgrimage by air from the United States to Lourdes. "If we go by plane, it will center attention upon devotion to Our Lady of Lourdes here at Old St. Patrick's, at the Shrine itself, and in every place where mention is made of it," he wrote Bishop Hugh C. Boyle. Pilgrims occupied all 32 seats of the TWA plane which departed Pittsburgh and stopped at New York, Newfoundland, and Ireland before arriving in Paris.

Father Cox died in 1951 at the age of 65. He did not live long enough to celebrate the centenary of the Lourdes apparitions. Pittsburgh would, however, be well represented.

The February 13, 1958 issue of the *Pittsburgh Catholic* announced "Diocese Leads Nation in Lourdes Pilgrims." Along with the Archdioceses of New York and Chicago, the Diocese of Pittsburgh had booked the most reservations for a pilgrimage to Lourdes later that summer. The itinerary called for all pilgrims to visit Lourdes and 13 other European cities during a 30-day tour. Those choosing so could opt for the "extended" plan and add another week to their adventure.

On August 22, 1958, several thousand passengers – including nearly 100 from Pittsburgh accompanied by Monsignors William G. Connare and Jacob D. Shinar, set sail on the S.S. United States from Pier 86 on Manhattan's North River bound for France. After a five-day crossing, the steamship docked at LeHavre not far from the beaches of Normandy. They then traveled to Paris by train, enjoyed a short stay there, and continued their pilgrimage to Lourdes. At 8 a.m. on September 1, the contingent joined Pittsburgh Bishop John F. Dearden for Mass at the Grotto.

While in Lourdes, the Pittsburgh delegation no doubt prayed for those *not* there. An earlier newswire article carried by the *Pittsburgh Catholic* on February 13, 1958 ("Lourdes Prayers 'Go' to the Church of Silence") recounted how French Bishop Pierre-Marie Theas of Tarbes and Lourdes pledged the prayers of the millions of pilgrims to "Catholics from captive countries in central and East Europe who live under communist domination and cannot come to this holy shrine." In his address given at Lourdes and later broadcast behind the Iron Curtain, the bishop recognized in a special way those suffering in Poland. That should, in retrospect, give us pause. Karol Wojtla, a son of the Church of Silence in Poland, was raised to Auxiliary Bishop of Krakow that very same year. Twenty years later he was elected pope – the first Polish pope and first non-Italian pope in more than 400 years. It would be this Polish pope who would be credited by many with the collapse of communism in his beloved homeland. Having as his motto, "Totus Tuus" ("I am all yours, Mary"), John Paul II was also the first reigning pope to visit Lourdes – once in 1983 and again in 2004. The latter pilgrimage would be his 104th and final foreign trip during his papacy.

The Pittsburgh pilgrims of 1958 also gathered at Lourdes for the Procession of the Blessed Sacrament and the Blessing of the Sick. The monstrance used for the blessing had been earlier donated to the shrine by the people of Pittsburgh through the late Father James R. Cox.

More than eight million pilgrims are expected to journey to Lourdes this year for the 150th jubilee. For those of us who cannot go, perhaps a visit to the Monastery Garden of Old Saint Patrick's in Pittsburgh's Strip District is in order. There, we can sit quietly and gaze on the Lourdes Grotto which Father Cox had erected. We can remember the spirit of the parish priest and, later, the Pittsburgh centenary pilgrims whose devotion compelled them to go to a distant cave where heaven once touched earth.